

It's Time to Stop the Darfur Genocide

By Tom Lantos

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The genocide in Darfur, Sudan, has ignited a grassroots movement across America. Concerned groups have called for those most responsible to be held accountable in an international criminal court. In the Bay Area, civic, religious, student, immigrant, and labor organizations are playing a leading role pressuring Congress and the Bush Administration to do their part to end this tragedy.

After the Holocaust, the world declared that never again would we stand by and let genocide take place. Yet, over the past three years in Darfur, the government of Sudan and its criminal militia, the Janjaweed, have slaughtered an estimated 400,000 because of their African identity, displaced over 2 million, and driven 200,000 into refugee camps in neighboring Chad. Inside Darfur, the government of Sudan has destroyed more than 60 percent of all homes.

The Sudanese government and its militia groups continue to target men and boys for torture and death while raping women and girls. The United Nations says 80 percent of refugees in the strife-torn western region of Darfur are women and children.

Activists have joined me and others in Congress to call upon the international community to pressure the government of Sudan stop its current course of action. As the Holocaust taught us, a villainous government that persecutes its own people cannot be counted on to keep its word; it must be compelled to do so.

Present plans are for the United Nations to deploy a peacekeeping force in early October 2006. Between now and then, it will be up to the monitors of the African Union (AU), deployed at only half its mandated troop levels, to protect internally displaced women, children, and men in Darfur. In spite of the heroic efforts displayed by the AU troops they have neither the capacity nor the mandate to take on the government of Sudan and its surrogate Janjaweed.

The immediate protection of civilians requires a broader international force to assist the AU and to augment it in critical areas of command and control, communications, and intelligence, as well as to protect villages from attack.

Last year, I called for NATO forces to intervene in Darfur to provide immediate civilian protection to stop the genocide. Last month, I introduced H. Res. 723, which proposes NATO support to the AU using ground and air assets to protect civilians until the UN peacekeeping force is fully deployed to its proposed strength of 20,000 peacekeepers. Last week, the Bush Administration announced its support for sending several hundred NATO advisors to help the AU protect villages from the fighting.

Over the next few weeks, the international community will have to make several critical decisions if we are to end the suffering in Darfur. April 30 is the deadline for a peace deal between the Sudanese government and Darfur rebel groups currently negotiating in Abuja, Nigeria. The US, EU, and AU must press the parties to the negotiations for a peace agreement by this deadline. Furthermore, the UN Security Council is debating targeted sanctions against individuals most responsible for crimes against humanity in Darfur. Grassroots support is desperately needed to make these decisions a reality.

The divestment campaign must continue to ensure the government in Khartoum does not profit from its oil resources while its military and proxies continue to kill, rape, maim, and destroy the lives and livelihoods of innocent women, children, and men in Darfur. I urge all government, university, labor, religious, and civic organizations to make sure their investments are not aiding the government of Sudan.

The San Francisco Bay Area Darfur Coalition has been organizing local residents for a series of events this week leading up to a Darfur Day of Conscience on Sunday, which will culminate in a rally and songfest. Everyone should try to attend these events and join the international voices against the genocide in Darfur.

Members of the public can also press congress to reconcile the Darfur Peace and Accountability Act of 2006, which will block assets and deny visas to government and Janjaweed commanders responsible for the genocide. And Congress needs to pass H. Res. 723 to let the world know the Darfur genocide is an international tragedy that requires an immediate international response.

Congressman Tom Lantos is the ranking Democrat on the House International Relations Committee and the founding co-chairman of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus